

ADDICTED TO
ARCHITECTURE



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ARCHITECTURE

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This book is dedicated to Lilian.

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PREFACE

My story is about finding the way from student days to professional maturity. I write about a design philosophy based on people's needs and the creation of relationships to shape environments in harmony with nature as enjoyable places for living, working and playing.

The perfection of interrelationships found in nature is my model for the shaping of things.

In its early years, 'the new architecture' seemed fresh and interesting. But later it too often failed to respond to human needs, both physical and psychological. Environmental considerations were often ignored and human aspirations left unsatisfied. Regional characteristics and relation to context are barely discernible in the age of internationalism. As a style, modern architecture has not always endeared itself to the public.

Dedicated to contemporary architecture since early student days, I have argued that it is the inevitable development of the technical and social achievements of its time. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, exciting engineering structures, such as the concrete shell structures of Robert Maillart and the steel structures of Gustave Eiffel, were pointing the way, while the architects were then busy reviving 'Revivals'.

I stress the validity of a 'natural' design approach—one based on needs, responding to the environment and to context, respecting human values, seeking direct solutions, then striving to integrate the parts in their simplest form. For me this is the very essence of design.

My architectural philosophy is based on five principles and allowing these to lead to the solution:

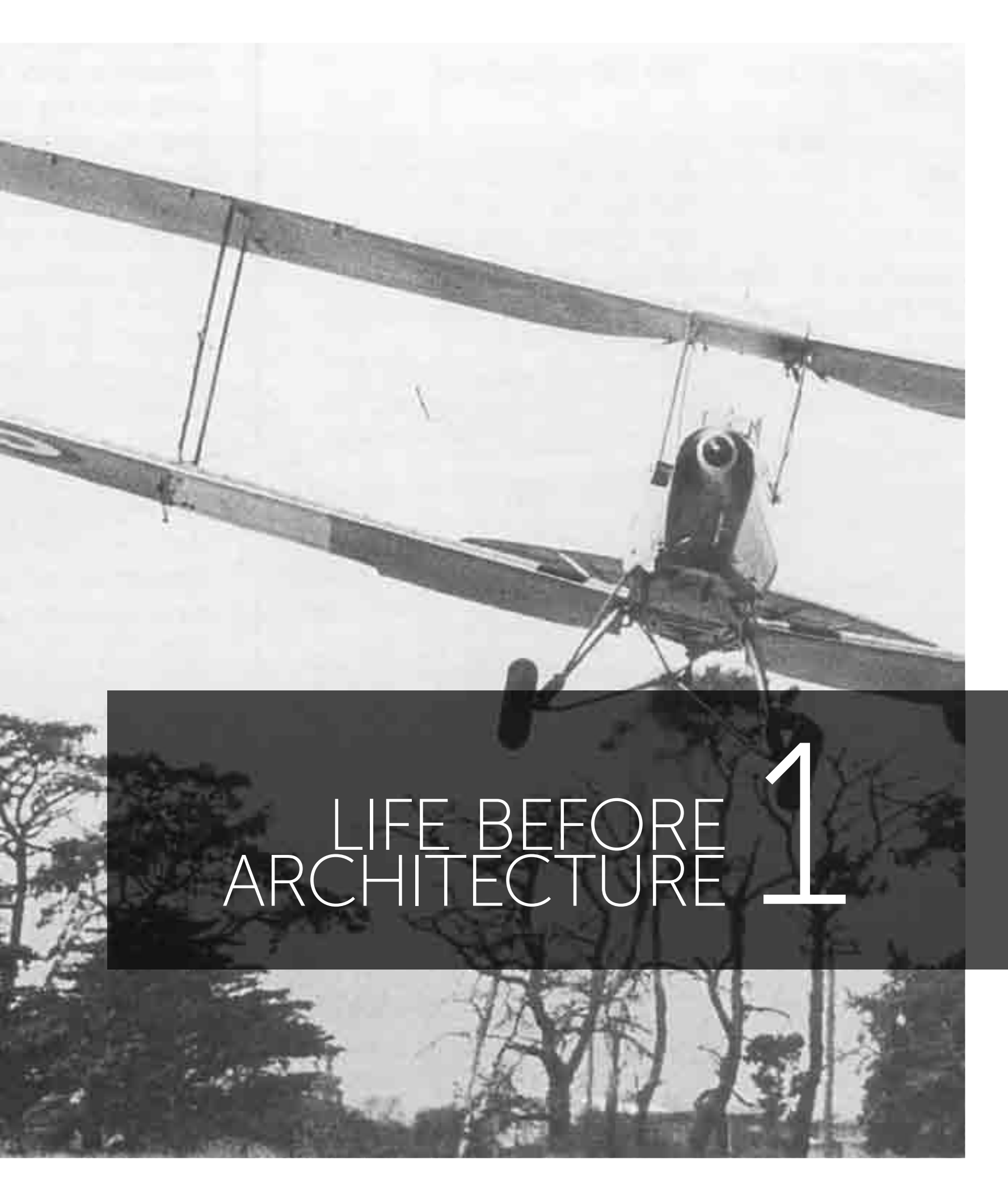
- design should address people's needs
- design should be problem-based, responding to site and climate
- design should not be genre or style derivative but fresh and innovative
- design should find a way to create harmonious relationships between the environment and the built form, while striving for simplicity
- design can benefit from the study of 'vernacular' architecture based on a close understanding of the local environment and materials.

I present a number of personal architectural endeavours based on this philosophy. The design rationale is outlined as the inspiration for and the generator of their shaping. My presentation comprises largely an explanation of why the examples are so formed, rather

than giving a description of the result. In architectural jargon that is said to be giving the 'why' rather than the 'what'.

Concentration on solving clearly defined problems, simply and directly, produces its own aesthetic, free of any style. To build with integrity, it is necessary to shake off stock responses, to evolve commonsense solutions based on a considered set of priorities and a relaxed response. The results may not necessarily lend themselves to glossy photographs, but the buildings will be good to live in and to be with.

Disillusionment with modern architectural practice in the 1950s led me to seek a sojourn with Italian masters of design in Milan. The close association enjoyed in that environment was invigorating. It was a revitalisation leading to a series of fortuitous experiences continuing over a lifetime.



LIFE BEFORE
ARCHITECTURE

1

Life before architecture

I have had a fortunate life and have enjoyed a lot of good luck throughout my career. While nothing can replace one's strong convictions and beliefs, dreams about them, planning and hard work; chance has given me, not only unimagined opportunities, but a first class passage through life on an economy fare.

I was born in 1926 in North Adelaide and lived for over twenty years in that compelling urban paradise. Home was at the city end of Jeffcott Street. My playgrounds were the wide tree-lined footpaths, the formal squares and the ring of parklands, all easily accessible on foot. From my bedroom window I overlooked Wellington Square. Here I could know the time by awakening sounds like those of an old-world village coming to life: the tinkling bell and clopping hooves of the Council draught horse, immaculately groomed, pulling its brightly painted and decorated dray; the scrape of the street cleaner's shovel on the road; the scrubbing and flushing of the horse trough at the edge of the Square; a herd of cows passing by between parkland and the distant milking shed.

My life began after my father and his brother, both having children by previous wives, married sisters. My mother when very young had adopted the orphaned child of her brother who died in the 1914–1918 War.

Our two families with double cousins, children and stepchildren were close and shared a passionate interest in theatre and food. We came together regularly. Cousins Bettie and Lois were 'extras' at the 1936 Russian Ballet performances in Adelaide. On our Sunday visits I would hear their stories of the remarkable people they had met during that experience, and about their heroes, like Noel Coward. They played classical music, loudly. Both Bettie and Lois excelled in the theatre. Bettie went to Sydney at the age of 19 and almost immediately was among the top, in theatre and radio drama. Lois, active in film, television and revue, was still 'treading the boards' in her 80s in a lead role at the Opera House Drama Theatre. In my early high school years, they inveigled me to accept a role in the Adelaide Repertory Theatre (now Her Majesty's) production of *Housemaster* by Ian Hay. Bettie briefed me in 'carrying' my voice, that of Crump the nervous student, to the back row of the Circle. Then there was a later stint in *Our Town* by Thornton Wylder. I enjoyed associating with the amusing and lively adult performers. I recall cousin Lois visiting us at North Adelaide with a school master friend. He sat on the floor with me discussing poetry. His name was Hal Porter.

We enjoyed a frugal, but rich life. A naturally unconventional family background with much lively wit and humour influenced my formative years. But I was the quiet one, involved in imaginative play, creating galleons out of boxes and graduating to making and flying model aeroplanes. That became my introduction to the theory of flight. Movement through space obsessed me and I dreamed of the prospect of learning to fly.

At the age of four, I started at Christ Church School where I spent seven years. In the whole school there were only about sixty pupils, with kindergarten and grades 1 and 2 in an outbuilding. The primary school had composite classes held in the two rooms behind the stage of the hall: grades 3, 4 and 5 sharing one room and grades 6 and 7 in the adjoining room. Inevitably, I absorbed a range of tuition and would focus on whatever interested me. Religion dominated at Christ Church. A service was held in the school hall every morning, Monday to Thursday, conducted by two curates. One, named Swan, later became my sons'

I loved the North Adelaide of my childhood. It was a fascinating juxtaposition of densely built form with mature gardens and open spaces varying from the immaculately landscaped to the wild.

preparatory schoolmaster. At Christ Church he seemed most interested in coaching us in vowel pronunciation during mid-morning sessions. On Friday mornings, we marched across the road to a formal service in the church. During the ritual, I passed the time contemplating the Ten Commandments in Gothic script on the wall, accepting these and the New Testament Bible stories happily enough as a good set of principles for life.

But, for me, the Sunday choir was a farce. Clutching my tiny, thick prayer book in two hands walking along Jeffcott Street, I was following in the footsteps of Dad and my half-brother Albert, both fine voices in the choir. I was probably too small, for there was not a spare white surplice to fit over my black cassock. Not properly robed to process through the church, I had to go in by the back doorway to the choir. As if this was not indignity enough, I was told to mouth the words silently when singing. Sunday School I found a complete waste of my precious time in the park and found ways to avoid it. During the Christ Church years, I became disenchanted with the religious ritual, unlike my cousin Lionel who became a Bishop. Over the years, nature and the simple things of life became my faith.

I loved the North Adelaide of my childhood. It was a fascinating juxtaposition of densely built form with mature gardens and open spaces varying from the immaculately landscaped to the wild.

Along Jeffcott Street, wide footpaths were and still are half-paved, the outer half gravelled with shallow but wide stone curbing and gutters. Enormous plane trees, closely spaced along the roadway, seemed to enclose the outer edge of the footpath space. Massive stone garden walls of varying heights lined the street fronts of the large houses, with heavy piers supporting cast iron balustrades and gates.

I now perceive the rationale for the variations in height of these stone garden walls. The high walls enclose the private garden spaces between houses. In the fronts of the buildings, the walling is low and surmounted by open cast iron balustrades with gates set between piers. In these sections, the houses have outlook over the street and are seen from it. The remainder of the site is given privacy by the high walls. The arrangement gives interest and a rhythmic, but sensibly varying, character to the street frontages. Buildings and garden walls of similar materials and form unify the whole. A similar pattern of street frontages is seen along the south side of Palmer Place.

The south side of Ward Street is the rear boundary of properties fronting to Palmer Place. Here the footpath is lined with high stone walls set on the alignment, some contiguous with the even higher walls of their outbuildings. These walls extend higher, their profile developing more complex forms. The crafted detail, the blending of brick quoins to corners and window surrounds give the walling a sculptural effect.

Laneways link streets, terraces and parks. Church Lane opens on to Palmer Place. On the opposite side Downs Lane beside Christ Church School opens on to Strangways Terrace and to the parkland adjoining the golf course.

Here were my trees for climbing and, in a rough section of park, a small creek with gently sloping earth bank for our toy trucks.



TOP: Christ Church School

ABOVE: Christ Church

BELOW: 138, 136 and 134 Jeffcott Street





TOP: Jeffcott Street looking south

CENTRE: Ward Street backenders of old Palmer Place houses

ABOVE: Palmer Place from Church Lane

In later years, the abutting golf links provided large stretches of relatively open space for our sailplanes which, when freed from their cotton towlines, soared, sometimes to lodge gracefully in the top of an enormous Moreton Bay fig tree, defying retrieval. In the evenings, when golf ball missiles were unlikely, the perimeter of the golf course became our running track.

From Jeffcott Street it was a short walk to North Terrace, passing through Church Lane to Palmer Place between the high wall of Bishop’s Court and Christ Church. In the 1930s, Church Lane was narrower. Its opening into the corner of the open space of Palmer Place created a nice spatial contrast when the garden of the formal park suddenly came into view. The grass sloped gently towards the Adelaide Parklands, giving on to a splendid outlook over the Adelaide Oval, the city, the cathedral and the hills beyond.

Being both naïve and idealistic, I wondered why all suburban streets could not be more like my section of Jeffcott Street—fine buildings, stone boundary walls, wide pavements and massive trees on the road edge.

My secondary schooling was at Adelaide High, the first years at Currie Street. In my first year, I had Alec Ramsay, an inspirational class teacher. In English he read to us from *Wind in the Willows*. He said that if he were President he would make everyone read *Treasure Island*; would introduce the metric system, then resign. I was fortunate in later life to meet Ramsay professionally, in his role as Chairman of the South Australian Housing Trust.

Again, I could walk to school, through the Parklands and along their edge as far as the River Torrens.

In those days, Jeffcott Street formed a T-junction with Strangways Terrace, so the vista to the south along Jeffcott Street was into the Parklands. Traffic to North Terrace turned left, continuing straight down on to Pennington Terrace to meet King William Street at St Peters Cathedral. Traffic proceeding to Morphett Street branched in a long S-bend following closely to the contours of Montefiore Hill, then straightening by Memorial Drive to align with the Morphett Street bridge. The walkway continued as the extension of the Jeffcott Street footpath alignment, passing through the park as a narrow steep pathway. That was a sensible arrangement. Cars took the longer route around the curve, on a roadway sensitively related to topography. Pedestrians took the shorter direct path. Jeffcott Street then had a vista at each end terminating on to parkland and the Square—more like an urban space than a road. Later, increasing and faster traffic converted that quiet road into a river of metal.

I believe that the straight line continuation of Jeffcott Street roadway down the steep grade was an unfortunate modification environmentally. It was claimed to offer advantages: speeding the flow of motor traffic and creating a direct vista on to the proposed ‘Opera House on Hill’ which would replace Carclew. The 1960s’ grand plan was abandoned, but not before the demolition of several fine old mansions and cottages.

In my opinion, a far better site for our Festival Theatre was east of Hindmarsh Square, where largely derelict buildings then stood. The introduction there of the Festival Theatre complex would have nicely complemented the interesting mix of cultural, commercial and professional uses between North Terrace and Pirie Street. Also, it could have had better-shared underground car parking facilities catering for day and night users. A substantial section of Elder Park would have been preserved.



The concerns and deprivations of the long World War 2, 1939–1945 were felt even in Adelaide. I remember gas masks lined up along the piano, and slit trenches cut in Victoria Square and in suburban backyards.

Our loft, built over two storerooms abutting the Wellington Square footpath, had become an important play space—our table tennis club. The brick walling was painted white and had a large overhead trough-shaped light fitting with lots of globes. After my brother Albert left to go into the Army, we developed other uses for the space which became a theatre, a cinema, an aeroplane modelling club and a gymnasium.

I helped my close friend Ron Westphal to dig their family slit trench. It quickly became our cubby house, where we worked out our philosophies on life, solved world problems and planned our futures.

Ron joined me in my energetic, almost spiritual, ventures to engage with nature, east to the hills and west to beaches. I particularly recall one Sunday morning cycling up Magill Road to Morialta Reserve. We clambered directly up the steep hill, ignoring pathways, quickly retreating when at the top we disturbed a nest of giant bull ants. We rode home to lunch, then down to the coast to take flying leaps over the edge of steep sand dunes, then racing into the sea to swim.

ABOVE: Palmer Place towards St Peters Cathedral